

THE QUALIFICATION TO HEAR

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Śrīmad Bhāgavatam 2.8.4 describes the importance of hearing:

*śṛṇvataḥ śraddhayā nityam grṇataś ca sva-ceṣṭitam
kālena nātīdīrghena bhagavān viśate hr̥di*

Persons who hear *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam* regularly and are always taking the matter very seriously will have the Personality of Godhead Sri Krishna manifested in their hearts within a short time.

One may ask, however, “Why is it that some people easily understand after hearing something while others don’t?” What is the qualification to hear? If one contemplates on the matter, one will understand that gaining divine knowledge through hearing is not a cheap, easy thing. In his *Prema-bhakti-candrikā* (2.8), Srila Narottam Das Thakur writes, *śunile nā śuna kāna* — hearing, but the sound doesn’t enter the ear.

In this age of instant communication, we expect immediate answers to our questions. From nearly anywhere in the world we can google from our cell phones and in seconds find out whatever facts we are interested in. Moreover, there are hundreds of translations of *vaiṣṇava* literatures available today, including descriptions of intimate and esoteric pastimes of Krishna and the *gopīs*. The temptation is there to dive into such literatures, thinking, “Simply by reading these books I can gain some entrance into the *līlās* and/or become famous as a learned preacher.” However, there is a difference between information and realized knowledge. Knowledge without realization simply brings pride.

After the disappearance of Srila Bhaktivinode Thakur, his dear son, Srila Saraswati Thakur, saw that some persons were trying to gain spiritual understanding by empiric reading of the writings of his father. To correct their misunderstanding he compiled an article entitled, “*Thakur Bhaktivinode*” which was published in the December 1931 issue of the Harmonist magazine. The following is a short excerpt:

There have, however, already arisen serious misunderstandings regarding the proper interpretation of the life and teachings of Srila Thakur Bhaktivinode. Those who suppose they understand the meaning of his message without securing the guiding grace of the *ācārya* are disposed to unduly favor the methods of empiric study of his writings.

... It is not empiric wisdom that is the object of quest of the devotee. Those who read the scriptures for gathering empiric wisdom will be pursuing the wild goose chase. There are not a few dupes of their empiric scriptural erudition. These dupes have their admiring under-dupes. But the mutual admiration society of dupes does not escape, by the mere weight of their number, the misfortunes due to the deliberate pursuit of the wrong course in accordance with the suggestions of our lower selves.

In the *Bhagavad-gītā*, 4.34, Krishna explains to Arjuna what is *śravaṇa-adhikāra*, the qualification to hear:

*tad viddhi praṇipātena paripraśnena sevayā
upadekṣyanti te jñānaṁ jñāninas tattva-darśinaḥ*

Just try to learn the truth by approaching a spiritual master. Inquire from him submissively and render service unto him. The self-realized souls can impart knowledge unto you because they have seen the truth.

Srila Ramanujacharya comments on this verse: *praṇipāta-paripraśna-sevādibhir viśadākāraṁ jñānibhyo viddhi* — “You will learn this divine knowledge from wise men by *praṇipāta*, offering obeisances to them, *paripraśna*, submissively inquiring from them, and by *sevā* — serving them.” These three items are required for one to have *śravaṇa ādhikāra*, the qualification to hear and deeply understand.

In his *Sārārtha-varṣiṇī ṭīkā* on the same *Gītā* verse, Srila Viswanath Chakravarti Thakur offers a similar explanation:

taj-jñāna-prāptaye prakāram āha tad iti. praṇipātena jñānopadeṣṭari gurau daṇḍavan-namaskāreṇa. bhagavan! kuto 'yaṁ me saṁsāraḥ? katham nivartisyate? iti paripraśnena ca. sevayā tat-paricaryayā ca

“This verse speaks of the method for attaining divine knowledge. It is gained by offering respects, bowing down to the guru, and by asking questions such as, ‘O master! Why am I in this world of misery? How will I be relieved from this world of birth and death?’ That knowledge is attained by service to the guru.”

Knowledge of the spirit soul and the Lord is not the same as ordinary mundane knowledge we acquire in the university. At the university we master a book, but in spiritual life we must serve the book — the *Bhagavad-gītā* and *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam* are direct manifestations of the Lord. In *Caitanya-bhāgavata* (antya 3.532) Srila Vrindavan Das Thakur has written, *dui sthāne bhāgavata-nāma śuni-mātra* — there are two *bhāgavatas*, the book *Bhāgavata* and the *bhakta*, devotee *bhāgavata*. We serve the book *Bhāgavata* by hearing from the *bhakta-bhāgavata*. Krishna tells Arjuna in the *Ādi Purāṇa* (quoted in Cc. madhya 11.28):

*ye me bhakta-janāḥ pārtha na me bhaktāś ca te janāḥ
mad-bhaktānām ca ye bhaktās te me bhakta-tamā matāḥ*

“Those who are my direct devotees are actually not my devotees, but those who are devotees of my servant are factually my devotees.”

Kuresh, the famous, intimate disciple of Srila Ramanujacharya once asked his guru the meaning of the well-known *Bhagavad-gītā* verse 18.66:

*sarva-dharmān parityajya mām ekaṁ śaraṇaṁ vraja
ahaṁ tvā sarva-pāpebhyo mokṣayiṣyāmi mā śucaḥ*

“Abandon all varieties of religion and just surrender unto me. I will deliver you from all sinful reactions. Do not fear.”

Ramanuja replied to him, “A person who gives up all independent desires and serves his guru absolutely for an entire year can fully understand the meaning of this verse, and no one else.”

“But life is so uncertain,” said Kuresh, “How can I know whether or not I will live for another year? Please bestow your mercy upon me by making the meaning of the verse manifest in my heart even now.”

Ramanuja considered his request for a while and then replied, “If you live for one month by begging alms from door to door, without knowing where your next meal will come from, then you will begin to realize the meaning of full surrender. At that time, I will instruct you in all the meanings of this glorious verse.”

For one month Kuresh lived as his guru had instructed. When the month had passed, he gained realized knowledge from Ramanuja about the nature of surrender to Krishna.

We should understand the difference between information collection and gaining realized knowledge. The latter only comes through offering respect, submissive inquiries, and rendering service to a devotee and not by mere reading. Srila Prabhupada once described:

Just like some rascals say, “What is the use of accepting a guru?” Of course, they have got very bad experience. ...It is not that, “If I like I can go to a guru, and if I don’t like I can study books at home and learn everything.” No, that is not possible. It is practical. Just like if you purchase a medical book, study at home, and then begin to practice, you will be called a quack. The government will not recognize you. ...Similarly, someone may say, “I have read *Bhagavad-gītā* a hundred times.” But if you ask him what is Krishna he cannot say because he has not approached the *ācārya*. This is the difficulty. He might have read *Bhagavad-gītā* a thousand times but he will not understand a single word because he has not approached. (From a lecture in Mumbai on 5 October 1973.) — MD

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